



## ***MEDIA RELEASE***

### **Managing children who offend**

Successful reform of the youth justice system is at risk if fundamental issues are not addressed. That is the conclusion of a report published today (1 December 2020) by the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG), Mr Kieran Donnelly CB.

*“Managing children who offend”* is a follow-up to a 2017 report by the C&AG, which highlighted the lack of a specific strategy to co-ordinate the youth justice system, as well as deficiencies around measuring the performance and cost effectiveness of services.

Today’s follow-up considers progress made by the Department of Justice and Youth Justice Agency, including a new strategic plan to implement change, *Transitioning Youth Justice*, agreed by the Department and Agency in early 2019.

The system has begun to work with young people in new ways, focusing on interventions that hold them accountable while supporting them to change their behaviour and return to normal life. The report highlights a number of issues.

- While fewer young people are being dealt with through the traditional youth justice process, reoffending rates have remained relatively stable year on year. Those who reoffend tend to do so relatively quickly after leaving the justice system, and a few go on to commit many further offences.
- Delays within the justice system are harmful to the young people involved. Despite fewer cases at court, there is no significant improvement in the timeliness of completion, with a generally deteriorating performance since 2014-15.
- Children in custody often have the most significant care needs. Despite this, the level of care and support provided to young people in the Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre has been recognised for its consistently high standard.
- Transforming complex public services like those provided by the youth justice system is inherently difficult. The Department and the Agency have made progress since our last report, but they have not yet addressed some of the most important strategic issues.
  - *Transitioning Youth Justice* presents a vision of how the system should work, but it is not a fully developed transformation strategy. There is currently no clearly defined end-state design for how the entire youth justice system will work.
  - Performance measurement does not yet provide a clear and comprehensive understanding of the impact of the Agency’s work on the lives and offending behaviour of the young people it deals with.
  - Organisations within the youth justice system lack the capacity to identify and apportion the cost of the different services they provide. Inadequate financial data poses a risk to the planning and management of reform. There remains little evidence of the financial impact of planned changes, even in those parts of the reform programme that are furthest developed.

**THIS STATEMENT IS ISSUED ON THE STRICT UNDERSTANDING THAT IT IS NOT FOR PUBLICATION OR BROADCAST BEFORE 00.01 hrs ON 1 DECEMBER 2020**

Mr Donnelly said:

*'The system is in the early stages of reform, developing new ways of working with young people. It is perhaps too soon to judge, but the evidence of progress is patchy so far. While the regime of care at Woodlands remains praiseworthy, it is not yet having an impact on reoffending rates. Without investment in these fundamental elements of transformation, there is undoubtedly a risk to the success of Transitioning Youth Justice.'*

**ENDS**

**Notes for Editors**

1. The Comptroller and Auditor General is Head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (the Audit Office). He and the NIAO are totally independent of Government. He certifies the accounts of Government Departments and a range of other public sector bodies. He has statutory authority to report to the Assembly on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which departments and public bodies use their resources. His reports are published as Assembly papers.
2. The report is available on the Audit Office website at [www.niauditoffice.gov.uk](http://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk). The report is embargoed until 00.01 hrs on Tuesday 1 December 2020.
3. Background briefing can be obtained from the Audit Office by contacting Neil Gray (028 9025 4345) or Michael Heery (028 9025 4348).